

What New Zealanders think about marine recreational fishing

Geoff Kerr, Ken Hughey, Ross Cullen
Lincoln University

Introduction

Opinions run hot on the future management of New Zealand's marine recreational fisheries. Proposed changes have generated heated exchanges between fisheries managers, commercial fishers, recreational fishers, conservationists and Maori. Problems have arisen because the Quota Management System (QMS) did not clearly identify how Total Allowable Catch would be shared between commercial, cultural and recreational harvesters, or how the recreational harvest would be allocated.

There is much at stake. Recreational fishers spend about one billion dollars a year targeting the five most commonly caught marine species. Recreational catches can be as much as ten times commercial harvests for some species. However, little is known about participation in the recreational marine fishery, or what New Zealanders think about the state of the fishery. A March 2002 survey of 2000 randomly chosen New Zealanders, undertaken by a team of Lincoln University researchers, provides some insights.

Participation

Recreational marine fishing is popular, with 34% of respondents participating. 25% of females are marine recreational fishers, compared with 44% of males. Participation varies by age. About 20% of under thirties and over seventies and about 35%-40% of other age groups participate in marine recreational fishing. There are approximately 920,000 active adult recreational marine fishers in New Zealand.

Fishing spending of about \$1000 per fisher per year represents a substantial portion of many households' disposable income, reflecting the importance of fishing. For this investment, each angler gets in the order of \$100 to \$200 of net benefit per year. A 10-20% after tax return is much better than putting money in the bank! The recreational fishery resource is clearly worth protecting.

What do fishers think about the condition of marine fisheries?

Most fishers rated fish abundance as moderate (49%) or low (41%), with only 10% of fishers claiming there are good fish numbers.

Fishery quality includes fish abundance and other factors, including items such as fish size, fish condition, catchability, environmental conditions, species mix, and so forth. This difference is reflected in higher ratings of fishery quality, with 40% of fishers scoring the fishery as good, 43% as adequate, and the remaining 17% as bad.

Sixty four percent of fishers thought that catching fish had become more difficult over the previous 5 years. While 33% thought there had been no change in fishery quality, 48% thought fishery quality had got worse. Marine fisheries management was considered by most fishers to be poor (39%) or adequate (44%).

When asked to identify the three most important causes of damage to marine fisheries, 60% of survey respondents (including non-fishers) nominated commercial fishing and one third of respondents attributed fisheries damage to sewage and storm water. Recreational fishing was seen to be a significant but cause of damage.

Marine recreational fishing licence

There is very little support for the concept of a recreational fishing licence, even amongst non-fishers. Seventy one percent of all survey respondents thought that recreational fishers should not have to obtain a licence to fish in the sea. Not surprisingly, recreational fishers are more strongly against licences (85% of fishers against) than are non-fishers (64%).

The survey measured fisher responses to introduction of a compulsory licence, with fees going to recreational fishers for fishery management purposes. About 35% of fishers claim they would fish without a licence. These fishers may have taken the opportunity to make a statement about their displeasure at the concept of introduction of a marine recreational fishing licence.

Effects of licence fees

Licence fee	Would still fish	Would buy a licence	Annual sales revenue
\$20	94%	60%	\$12 million
\$50	90%	49%	\$25 million
\$70	86%	42%	\$30 million
\$100	77%	32%	\$32 million
\$150	56%	19%	\$28 million

The table shows the impact of licences. Maximum income occurs at a price of about \$100 per year, which would cause about 23% of fishers to quit, but only 32% would buy a licence. The \$32 million per year raised from licence sales could be used for recreational fishery management. However, much smaller fees are still capable of generating substantial income. Even a \$20 fee would generate \$12 million each year, but very few people would quit fishing. It does not make sense to set licence fees at more than \$100.

A fishing licence can be good for fishers if it results in higher quality recreational experiences. Such improvements may occur because licences result in less fishing pressure, which allows fish stocks to recover, and/or if licence fees are used to improve the fishery – and \$30 million per year could go a long way to enhancing recreational fisheries. However, these benefits for fishers will only occur if licence fees are used for fishery management and stock enhancements are not transferred to commercial fishers through a higher Total Allowable Commercial Catch. Introduction of a licence would need to be accompanied by assurances that fishers would capture the benefits of any improvements to fish stocks they had contributed to.

Conclusions

About a third of New Zealanders are marine fishers. They spend about \$1 billion on fishing each year and get a very good return on their investment. However, most fishers rate fish abundance as very low and getting worse and show little enthusiasm for how the fishery is managed. Clearly, people think there is potential for maintaining or increasing the value of the fishery by managing it better. However, a recreational fishing licence does not currently figure in fishers' plans. If a licence were required many fishers are likely to fish without one. Even so, a licence has the potential to raise a large amount of revenue and may be to fishers' advantage if they can use that revenue to help to manage the fishery as occurs in freshwater sport fisheries.